

# The European refugee crisis: CTBI delegation report

September 2015





## Introduction

***'In Syria we have a quick death with bombs. But here, we have a slow death on the road.'***

Senior UK Church leaders and representatives visited Idomeni, on the Greek-Macedonia (Former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia, (FYROM)) border, where they met some of the thousands of refugees fleeing conflict.

The group held discussions with local volunteers and activists, local government officials, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) representatives, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), and Médecins du Monde.

The delegation was welcomed as a high mission and was the first of any kind from the UK to see the situation on the ground first-hand.

In Athens it met with the UK Ambassador to Greece, the Interim Minister for the Interior, the Head of the UNHCR Mission in Greece, the Greek Church's Ecumenical Refugee Programme (KSPM) including members of the Anglican chaplaincy.

The unofficial border opening at Idomeni has seen up to 5,000 mainly Syrian refugees pass through every day on their way to Serbia and northern Europe.

According to the International Organisation for Migration, over half a million people have arrived in Europe since the beginning of the year. Approaching 400,000 of these have landed in Greece, the majority Syrians fleeing conflict. UNHCR is planning for up to 700,000 people seeking safety and international protection in Europe this year alone, and preparing for a similar figure in 2016. Nearly 3,000 people have drowned trying to get to Europe this year.

**Revd. Bob Fyffe, General Secretary of CTBI, said:**

“What we saw and heard was shocking and savage. The refugees carry their lives in plastic bags. Many are at the mercy of brutal smuggling gangs. How is that choice?

“Aid workers warned us that border closures would result in humanitarian disaster. Sadly, we now see this prophecy unfolding across Europe.

“As winter approaches, transit tents, temporary toilets and showers are finally being erected at Idomeni. But volunteers have been working with refugees in this area for two years with barely any support. This is a scandal.”

**His Grace, Bishop Angaelos, General Bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the UK, and Moderator of CTBI, said:**

“We saw the incredible desperation of refugees who were willing to risk journeys in what they themselves called ‘death boats’ as a means of escape; but we also saw the dedication of those who serve them, many of whom are volunteers.

“We stand united with and for those working tirelessly to protect the God-given human rights of these refugees, and those who save the lives of many forced to make this perilous journey.

“The preservation of dignity and protection of the vulnerable is our common cause.

“As more borders close, refugees who have already sacrificed almost everything will still find alternate routes because they have nothing to lose. In anticipation, we must collaborate to formulate a coherent and humane response.”

**Rt. Revd. David Hamid, Church of England Suffragan Bishop in Europe, said:**

“A powerful unity emerged during the visit and a shared vision of working together to preserve human dignity and save lives. A future partnership is being forged dedicated to the spiritual and moral shared duties of protecting God-given human rights.”

The delegation was made up of: His Grace Bishop Angaelos, General Bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the United Kingdom; Rt. Rev. David Hamid of the Church of England Diocese of Europe; Revd. Bob Fyffe, General Secretary of CTBI; Cecilia Taylor-Camara, Migration Senior Policy Advisor to the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales; Christine Elliott, CTBI Director for World Church Programmes; and Rev Aled Edwards, CEO of Cytûn/ Churches Together in Wales.



## Greek local response



In Idomeni itself, the community had been dealing with the impact of the refugee crisis for years before the media spotlight landed on the town earlier this summer.

Church volunteers, local government officials and the Thessaloniki Refugee Solidarity Movement organised themselves into highly effective units, working 24-hour shifts at the border to provide food, clothing and water for refugees.

Amir Karimi arrived in Greece as a refugee from Afghanistan in 2001. Now fluent in Greek and a member of the Thessaloniki Evangelical Churches group, he has been working seven days a week to provide support for the influx of refugees to his city.

At one point, he was even moved to house a Syrian family of nine in his own home.

He accompanied the CTBI delegation to Idomeni, along the way describing the efforts himself and others have been making to support refugees, and providing context to the crisis.

Many refugees who travel by boat from Turkey to Greece find themselves camping in the centre of Thessaloniki before crossing the border to FYROM.

It is then a two-hour train journey from the Macedonian border town of Gevgelija to the capital Skopje. From there, refugees travel to Hungary and onto their final destinations in Germany and northern Europe.

Initially, documentation limited refugees to just a few hours within Greece to travel from Athens to the Macedonian border. However, this has changed, and Syrian refugees are now given a six-month visa in Greece.

According to Mr Karimi, when the crisis first began, people paid smugglers up to €1500 to get to the Romanian border from Turkey.

***“There is very little central state help at all for refugees in Greece. There are some hostels and safe houses; there is one in central Athens. But it’s very minor in terms of what is needed,”*** he said.



***“There is no accommodation at all in Thessaloniki. Sometimes non-governmental organisations (NGOs) want to help - but there are no resources.”***

(the Former Yugoslavia Republic of )Macedonia and its northern neighbour Serbia are not part of the European Union.

However Hungary, to the north of Serbia, is a EU member and is part of the Schengen area. This means that once in Hungary people can travel onwards throughout much of Europe (excluding Britain and Ireland) without needing to show documents at international borders.

Most refugees arrive at the border early in the morning in order to catch the first train to Skopje. There, volunteers provide food and water to support refugees for the long journey ahead.

Mr Karimi said there had been a mixed response to the arrival of refugees.

***“Yes, there has been some local hostility. But many charities are working together to ensure the refugees are looked after.”***

This is borne out by the partnership between the secular Thessaloniki Refugee Solidarity Movement, and the work of the local Evangelical Churches group, led by Pastor Dimitris Tsoukalas of the Global Hope Network.



They are part of a non-formal organising committee for refugees, led by the deputy mayor, Evelina Politidou, and local filmmaker Vasilis Tsartsanis.

Christa Calbos, an American-Greek student who has been moved to volunteer to provide advocacy for the refugees, also accompanied the delegation. There is also a group of people within the area who house refugees.

Yet lack of coordination is still a huge problem.

***‘Idomeni has become a place of international interest,’ said Vasilis Tsartsanis. ‘People have turned up to take selfies with the refugees. But it is more important that we help the volunteers.’***

For some time, Pastor Tsoukalas has been working on gender rights, employment and education projects with the centuries old Muslim Pomak community on the Greek-Macedonian border, descendants of native Bulgarians who converted to Islam during the Ottoman rule of the Balkans.

It was natural for him to work with the predominantly Muslim refugees flowing through the Idomeni border.

He has mobilised local churches to provide donations of food and water, as well as basic medical supplies.



Bishop David and HG Angaelos made telephone contact with the Greek Orthodox Metropolitan of Thessaloniki, Anthimos, but time constraints prevented a personal meeting.



## Local Government capacity

Paionia is a town of about 30,000 inhabitants, the closest large settlement to Idomeni.

The Mayor of Paionia, Christos Gkountenoudis, explained to the delegation that the town has neither the power nor resources to deal with the refugee issue on their own.

***“We should be supported internationally. We are doing our best by cooperating with central government and non-governmental agencies. We asked government for more resources, but they could not help us.*”**

***“We are alone in dealing with this.”***



According to Mayor Gkountenoudis, the situation improved over the weeks before the visit; numbers have become more manageable. Yet huge challenges remain.

***“This area was built on refugees. We are all refugees here. We want to be able to bring dignity to these people.”***



People travelling through Idomeni are in transit on their way to other countries in Europe. They do not want to stay in Greece.



Therefore, the most important thing is to provide food, water, medical treatment and dried food for the journey ahead.

When asked what the British and Irish churches should do, Mayor Gkountenoudis said sending money was not the answer, due to the bureaucracy and cost of processing funds.

Instead, he continued, it is vital to ensure that any fundraising is targeted and agreed with the local planning committee.

***“We don’t want to make any hollow promises. We are thinking about what can be provided – but we also need to ensure that it is supported by local communities,”*** agreed Bishop David Hamid.

## **Mafia**

A relatively undocumented yet fundamental aspect of the whole refugee crisis is the role of the organised smugglers and Mafia in exploiting refugees and migrants from the Middle East, Afghanistan and even further afield.

The delegation was told that age old Balkan drug and gun smuggling routes are now being used to traffic human beings into western and northern Europe.

It is estimated that if each individual is now paying €1000 to €1500 to enter Greece, whether by overland route or by boat then organised gangs are making around €2 million every day.

It has been reported that unaccompanied (refugee) minors are being used to traffick drugs and guns. In addition people have been attacked and mugged for their Syrian passports, which can fetch up to thousands of euros on the black market due the fact that migrants with this status are given preferential status.

The Mayor, his deputy and other volunteers are seriously concerned about the violence and criminality in this context and fear for the safety of the migrants and refugees, especially those who are most vulnerable to being trafficked. Their frustration is made worse because they believe they are not being heard.

## On the border



The movement of people through Idomeni has been increasing slowly and steadily through the summer months, with 44,000 people reportedly travelling through the border over August and July.

As many as 4,000 people were arriving each evening during August; the day the delegation arrived was a slight lull in the numbers. After September 19, the numbers starting increasing again.



However, the situation at Idomeni was at its worst on August 21, when hundreds of migrants rushed at (FYRO) Macedonian border forces in an attempt to enter the country from Greece.

The security forces beat back the refugees and migrants with truncheons and riot shields, (FYRO) Macedonia declared a state of emergency, and the UN urged both Greece and (FYRO) Macedonia to tackle a 'deteriorating situation'.

Razor wire was rolled across the frontier to prevent people from entering, and MSF treated 10 people with wounds from stun grenades fired by (FYRO) Macedonian troops.

There were also chaotic scenes at Gevgelija train station as people crammed in trains to travel north.

On arrival at the border site, the delegation witnessed less than 1000 migrants and refugees, mostly young men, moving in a queue formation steadily but slowly through the border, where they follow the train tracks that will eventually take them to the station. As they have no wi-fi or directions, this is the only way of reaching their destination.

Many refugees were asking the delegation for information about potential closures on the Hungarian border. (The following day, the Hungarian border with Serbia was closed, forcing thousands of people to travel to Hungary through Croatia.)





The refugees were orderly and appeared exhausted. As they filed through, Evelina and her team handed out water and food.

Most of the refugees were single men aged between 18 to 25. There were also young families and elderly people accompanied by their children. Most of the people the delegation spoke to said they were from Syria and Afghanistan. Most of the Syrians appeared to be middle class.

The vast majority of people were from the Middle East, although there were some from sub-Saharan Africa.

### ***Moiyad***

Moiyad is a business administration student from Damascus, Syria. He paid smugglers €1000 to cross to Greece via a boat from Turkey. He hopes to join his brother in Leipzig, Germany.

***“Why am I doing this journey? Because a German degree is the best. I was scared when we were on the boat. But I have to make this journey.”***



### ***Diana***

Diana and her mother Majida paid smugglers US\$1,200 each to take them on a boat from Turkey to Greece. Diana is a lawyer, and is heading for Germany. Originally from Damascus, her house was destroyed in the war.

### ***Riad***

Privately educated engineer Riad, 65, was travelling to Germany with his two daughters and son-in-law.

***“We have left because everyone is miserable, they are all trying to kill each other. I am bringing my family from hell to a safe place.”***

### ***Ali***

Engineering student Ali is from Syria. He said he wants to go to Germany so he can finish the final year of his degree; he added that he knew that refugees were welcome in Europe because he had seen a banner saying ‘Refugees welcome’ at a football match.

He added that he believed there was less racism in Germany than the UK or Sweden.

***‘I do not want to be a refugee. I want to be a citizen.’***



## Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) response



Antonis Rigas leads the (MSF) team at Idomeni, providing medical support for the thousands of people passing through.

There are plans to construct ten small tents, which can house up to 2,500 people who need to be treated or fed. MSF have also set up showers and toilets. The most common medical problems refugees suffer are sunstroke, foot injuries, and dehydration from the sea journey.



The team also hand out refugee 'kits' with basic necessities.

Mr Rigas' main concern was the impact of border closures.

***“We cannot understand why they insist on travelling over the water on these highly dangerous boats instead of travelling overland on buses from Turkey to Greece.***

Mr Rigas also stated that only recently, the Greek government had given official permission for MSF to work on the border.

## United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) response



Luca Guanziroli is a member of the team leading the UNHCR team at Idomeni.

When asked what he would say to politicians, he had a single response: 'Winter is coming'.

In order to cope with the onset of poor weather, UNHCR are constructing six large 'transit tents', which can each process up to 150 people at a time. The aim is to provide a space where people can get quickly registered before moving north - but it also prevents family separation and the kinds of crushes seen at other borders when large numbers of refugees arrive at once.

Greece, however, is not an ideal location for a refugee camp. Land ownership issues and bureaucracies mean there is not the land available to build a 'camp' on the border site.

In common with Mr Antonis, Mr Guanziroli was also hugely concerned about the potential of border closures.

***"If they did decide to close the border, we would have 15,000 people here. And it would be a catastrophe. If they could not go through here, they would travel overland through Bulgaria, which is very dangerous."***

***"They are not choosing to come here. Refugees are coming here because it's the first safe place they can get to."***

He argued that the best way to avoid huge backlogs of people is to transport them to their destination by plane. Many of the Syrian refugees are aiming for Germany, and specifically Hamburg, home to a large Syrian diaspora community where many of the refugees have relatives.

Many Iraqis are heading to Finland – again, to join with a diaspora community that already exists there. So cutting out the long, tortuous and difficult journey to Northern Europe would save lives, money, and would also cut out the traffickers and smugglers exploiting the crisis for criminal gain.



***“Wi-Fi is more important to many refugees than a tent,”*** Mr Guanziroli also explained.

***“A lot of them will take pictures of where they are and put them on Facebook; not because they are being tourists, but because they need to be tracked by relatives.”***

He praised the huge efforts of local volunteers – ‘they are Greek; they understand the local situation much more’ - and he is working with them to enhance coordination by building a storehouse for food supplies.

The next aim for the UNHCR is to be able to provide some psychosocial support for refugees, and in particular for their children. Many are deeply traumatised; not only by their experience with war in Damascus, Aleppo and Homs, where they have seen bombings and beheadings in the street, but also by the violence of their journeys from Turkey.

***“When children play, they forget,”*** Mr Guanziroli said.



It is very rare to see unaccompanied children at Idomeni as the extended family structures of Middle Eastern and African societies mean relatives as well as immediate parents look after children.

But there are many unaccompanied adolescents passing through the border, aged 18 and under. Many try and conceal their true age, however, to avoid being taken into statutory care by the authorities.

## International response



Meeting with the UK ambassador to Greece John Kittmer, it was clear there is considerable disappointment over the lack of UK engagement with the refugee crisis from both the government and civil society.

***"I have been shocked by the apparent lack of interest from the UK. You are the first group from the UK over all the months of this crisis to come and see the situation for yourselves. We have had no non-governmental interest apart from this visit.***

***"It is shocking that way that it has been reported; it has been characterised by the Daily Mail framing the issue as an inconvenience to tourists. We have some really good stringers here, but they have struggled to get the stories out there."***

In terms of the smuggling crisis, he stated that Scotland Yard and the National Crime Agency were involved. The UK has donated £1 billion to refugee camps.

***"We are ourselves tied up most days in dealing with the political issues. This crisis cannot be dealt with by Europe alone. And the large numbers of Syrians are disguising a huge influx of Afghanis."***

While Rev. Fyffe made the point that the UK was not, 'anywhere near' the mark of fairness in terms of its commitment to accept 20,000 Syrian refugees, Bishop Angaelos suggested that the quota system should be designed to prioritise the most vulnerable. Dr Vasileios Meichanetsidis, of the Greek Orthodox Church's Apostoli Mission for supporting deprived and marginalised communities, made the point that many rich Gulf states had not accepted one refugee; whilst offering to build 200 mosques for refugees in Germany.

Cecilia Taylor-Camara, Migration Senior Policy Advisor to the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, had concerns that refugees were experiencing discrimination in terms of their sexual orientation, religion and economic status.

Yes, despite these concerns, Alessandra Morelli, of the UNHCR Greece, stressed that the position of agencies had to be one of unity. She holds update meetings with Mr Kittmer on a fortnightly basis.

***"We only have one response; solidarity. The world is changing; whether we like it or not."***



UNHCR efforts have been focussed on processing refugees at the point of arrival in the Greek islands. Between 1 to 14 September, 55,000 refugees arrived in Greece; during one 36-hour period on the island of Leros, 18 people registered 18,000 migrants and refugees, an operation Ms Morelli described as a miracle.

The majority of registered arrivals – 77% - were not coming direct from the refugee camps, Ms Morelli explained. Most of those in the camps do not have the resources to pay smugglers for the trip.

Recently, more and more refugees are rejecting the sea route to Greece as too dangerous, and attempting the trip overland.

She implored the delegation not to 'leave her alone'; Christine Elliott, CTBI Director for World Church Programmes, stated that all parties must ***'cling to hope in the face of this massive humanitarian crisis.'***

***"Our common denominator is human dignity. The church is the biggest NGO (non-governmental organisation) in the world,"*** added Bishop Angaelos.

## UNHCR Greece



Alessandra Morelli has worked for the UN for many years. In a frank and open conversation at the residence of Revd. Canon Malcolm Bradshaw, Senior Anglican Chaplain of Athens, Ms Morelli admitted that her colleagues were overwhelmed by the scale of the humanitarian crisis facing them in Europe.

Despite the support of the Greek government, they were exhausted by what they saw as well as the long hours needed to tackle the problem.

She also described the urgent need for a transit camp in Kos, with a central registration point and transport between the Greek islands and the mainland for both refugees and supplies. She seemed confident that EU funds would be provided for such a facility.

She powerfully articulated the frustrations and concerns of the whole delegation.

***"How can we put Matthew: 25 into action? How can we preserve human dignity of people in transit and limit loss of life?"***



A former Franciscan nun, she wholeheartedly embraced the support the delegation offered her, and gratefully accepted their prayers. When pressed on the lack of support offered by the UN to Christians fleeing the Middle East, she opened herself for forgiveness.

***“I am the UN, all I can do is alleviate human suffering and keep people alive.”***

Bishop David Hamid suggested that the policy of the church should be to empower those, like Ms Morelli, who are working on the front line of the refugee crisis.



***“We have to be prophetic,”*** he added. ***“This has to be about preserving the fundamentals of human rights and dignity.”***

***“The traffickers have information to hand out. But what information are we giving the refugees?”***

***“What makes us human is not the freedom to choose – but the capacity to choose, both for ourselves and our families. The refugees we met said that at home they faced a quick death. But coming to Europe was a long death on the roads.”***

Bishop Hamid said the churches’ response needed to be about ‘going back to their roots’ – and dealing with direct and urgent humanitarian need.

***“If we are not loving and caring for our brothers and sisters, then what is the point?”***



Rev Jimoh Adebayo, a Nigerian representative of Athens' Faith Apostolic Ministries, said there was an urgent need for the spiritual unity across the different churches. He echoed the unity Ms Morelli said was necessary for an effective response to the crisis.



This powerful alliance, between the Greek and UK churches and aid community, was Ms Morelli said, ***“very, very much needed.”***

The delegation and the UNHCR agreed to create a formal partnership; one that celebrated solidarity, whilst also pushing for the protection of human rights and basic dignity for those refugees in transit across Europe.

***“We are being tested; I can feel it. This is a biblical crisis. We need to walk with the refugees, we need to breathe their air. And that is where the UNHCR is.”***

## **Interim Greek Interior Minister Ionnis Mouzalas**



Despite just returning from a high-level EU summit of interior ministers, Ionnis Mouzalas was extremely welcoming to the delegates.

***“The discourse of God is the discourse of love. And love is also an action. People need to hear your voice. If not yours, it could be the voice of fanatics.”***

He told the delegation that at the summit, ministers agreed in principle to relocate 120,000 asylum seekers. The following week, they reached a deal to share out the refugees across the EU - despite opposition from some central and eastern states.

***“There is a big difference between governments. It will be an act of God if the UK government change their tone on this matter,”*** Mr Mouzalas said.

***“One thing is for certain; I am not willing to turn my country into a detention camp.”***

Mr Mouzalas described plans to extend the ‘hotspot’ scheme that already exists in Piraeus to five Greek islands.



It is envisaged that these hotspots would be processing and temporary accommodation units where refugees would stay until registered before being allowed to move onto a final destination, according to the quota system. It was unclear, however, exactly how these would work.

## **Recommendations**

- An alternative to border closures to mitigate against exploitation and put in place safe and legal pathways into Europe for those needing protection.
- Concrete measures to prevent exploitation by organised criminals, traffickers and smugglers
- Greater collaboration within and between states and agencies to support refugees
- Support to create large-scale emergency reception, assistance and registration efforts in the countries most impacted by arrivals
- More support for UNHCR proposals for purpose-built transit camps and central registration points in the Greek islands
- As winter fast approaches, efforts to support refugees need to be increased in order to avoid an even worse human catastrophe
- Whilst we are encouraged by the steps taken by HM Government to allow some entry from refugee camps, we stress the need to open our borders to receive some of the refugees now risking their lives to reach safety

## Media coverage

BBC Radio 5 Live Breakfast Show, 20.09.15

Church Times, 18.09.15

<http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2015/18-september/news/world/bishop-fears-for-migrants-in-balkans>

Church Times, 25.09.15

<http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2015/25-september/news/world/help-refugees-to-escape-a-slow-death-urges-coptic-bishop>

Christianity Today, 21.09.15

<http://www.christiantoday.com/article/incredible.desperation.prominent.church.leaders.visit.refugee.camps.to.express.solidarity/65358.htm>

Premier Christian Radio, 24.09.15

<https://www.premierchristianradio.com/News/World/Death-boats-is-proof-of-desperate-situations-refugees-are-in-says-Bishop-Angaelos-of-the-UK-Coptic-Orthodox-Church>

TWR Radio: <http://www.twr.org.uk/> 27.09.15

## Acknowledgements

We offer heartfelt thanks to all those who facilitated and supported the delegation's mission:

Revd Canon Malcolm Bradshaw, Senior Anglican Chaplain, Athens

Archimandrite Ignatios Sotiriadis, Secretary of the Synodical Committee for Inter-Orthodox and Inter-Christian Relations, Church of Greece

Dr Vasileios Meichanetsidis, Apostoli Mission

Rev Jimoh Adebayo, Faith Apostolic Ministries

Efthalia Pappa, Project Manager, Ecumenical Refugee Programme, Athens

Evelina Politidou, Vasilis Tsartsanis, Christa Calbos, and Amir Karimi of the Thessaloniki Refugee Solidarity Movement

Pastor Dimitris Tsoukalas

